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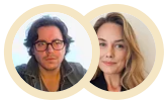
‘Embarrassing and Disappointing’: Stanford Goes All-In On COVID Contrarians

An upcoming conference held in the name of academic freedom raises questions about academic rigor.



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“Pandemic Policy: Planning the Future, Assessing the Past,” hosted by the Stanford Department of Health Policy, is set to take place on October 4. A description of the event claims the panels are “bringing together esteemed academics, public health practitioners, journalists, and government officials from all sides of the COVID policy debate in conversation with one another with an eye toward reforms in science and public health to better serve the public.”

However, the summit, which has drawn sharp criticism from scientists and medical experts, really appears to be aimed at stamping the Stanford name and seal on an alternate version of pandemic history that recasts essential public health tools opposed by major business interests in a negative light.

“Despite decades of planning for the ‘next’ pandemic, public health systems faced tremendous stress and often buckled and failed,” the description continues. “Universities served as centers for valuable scientific work but failed to support their academic freedom mission by sponsoring vigorous discussion and debate on matters of pandemic policy.“

The name and theme of the Stanford Health Policy conference echo those of the February 2023 opening hearing of the Republican-controlled House Select Subcommittee on the Coronavirus Pandemic (HSSCP), which was called “Preparing For the Future By Learning From the Past: Examining COVID Policy Decisions.” The similarities are no coincidence. The Stanford summit is the project of one of the GOP expert witnesses from the HSSCP hearing.

According to public posts on social media and private messages obtained by *Important Context*, Stanford professor and health economist Dr. Jay Bhattacharya, who is in the

university's health policy department, is behind the conference, recruiting panelists. In one of the messages, as well as a post on X, Bhattacharya directly claimed credit for the event.

Bhattacharya has been a controversial figure, earning a reputation throughout the pandemic for his outspoken—and often combative—opposition to public health measures. A co-author of the so-called Great Barrington Declaration, which advocated a COVID herd immunity strategy based on mass infection and limited protections for the vulnerable only, Bhattacharya has long argued that lockdowns, masks, and vaccine requirements did more harm than good.

Over the years, this advocacy has become more hardline. Not only does he claim that the harms of shutdowns and masking outweigh the benefits, he has adopted the position that these measures simply do not work to stop the spread of the virus. On one occasion, he even suggested that "lockdowns" may have been to blame for Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Additionally, Bhattacharya has endorsed the idea that the SARS-CoV-2 virus originated in a Chinese laboratory and claimed that public health officials like Dr. Anthony Fauci, the former director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, worked to cover up the truth. He recently joined the board of directors of a controversial scientist group that continues to push the evidence-lacking lab leak hypothesis. The founders of this group, Biosafety Now, have been accused of "defaming and intimidating" scientists who promote the virologist-favored natural origins and "poisoning the debate" over the viral origins.

Bhattacharya has also made statements that encourage vaccine skepticism. In 2021, a few months before the country experienced a devastating COVID surge, Bhattacharya wrote an op-ed calling universal vaccination in India "unethical" on the grounds that most of the population had natural immunity.

"For recovered Covid patients, then, the vaccines provide no benefit and some harm," he wrote. "It is thus unethical to vaccinate them."

Several months later, Bhattacharya made a similar case for the U.S., arguing that the

small risk of severe side effects from the jabs outweighed the benefits for young people. Ironically, in the same piece, he also argued that mandating vaccines would deny doses to countries that needed them—like India.

Bhattacharya's foray into the anti-vaccine world has only continued. In May 2022, he participated in a panel discussion with anti-vaccine activist Steve Kirsch, a tech millionaire and founder of the Vaccine Safety Research Foundation, only offering mild pushback against his claims that the jabs had killed millions. A few months later, Bhattacharya came out against the bivalent boosters, arguing that they were not adequately tested for human use.

Unsurprisingly, Bhattacharya has also allied himself with vaccine skeptics, like YouTube comedian Jimmy Dore and actor-turned-podcaster Russell Brand, whose shows he has appeared on. The professor has also amplified Robert Kennedy Jr.'s failed independent presidential campaign. In March, Bhattacharya spoke at the Bay Area campaign event at which Kennedy's vice presidential pick was announced.

Bhattacharya's advocacy has alienated him from the mainstream of public health—something that appears to be a source of frustration. But it has also given him a large, devoted social media following and remarkable access to GOP officials, including Donald Trump and Ron DeSantis, right-wing media, and business-aligned dark money groups that do not want to see economically disruptive mitigation measures return in the future.

His Great Barrington Declaration was originally organized through a deep-pocketed libertarian think tank with help from inside the Trump administration. Bhattacharya himself is a senior fellow at the Hoover Institution, a well-funded right-wing public policy think tank housed at Stanford. He recently received an award with a significant monetary prize attached from the Lynde and Harry Bradley Foundation. Bhattacharya is also a member of the so-called Norfolk Group— contrarian doctors assembled seemingly to assist the HSSCP by the Brownstone Institute, a shadowy dark money group aimed at combating government efforts to limit the spread of COVID.

Although Bhattacharya is not speaking on any of the panels on October 4, his influence is obvious. The conference is set for the anniversary of the signing of the Great

Barrington Declaration, its participants are allies, and the discussions promise to flog many of his favorite hobby horses.

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The panels will open with remarks from the university's brand new president, Jonathan Levin, who previously served as the dean of their business school. Levin has published multiple papers in economics journals with Bhattacharya on Medicare costs.

The focus of the first panel discussion will be "Evidence-Based Decision Making During a Pandemic." Set to speak on the topic is Bhattacharya's fellow Norfolk Group member Dr. Marty Makary, a Johns Hopkins University surgeon who also served as a GOP expert witness at the HSSCP's opening hearing in February 2023.

Like Bhattacharya, Makary is an opponent of government vaccine and mask mandates. He has claimed that infection-acquired immunity is superior to that derived from the vaccines and hyped up safety concerns about the jabs. In fall 2022, he argued against the need for the bivalent boosters and claimed the White House had "gone rogue" in approving the allegedly untested jabs.

Makary has made bad predictions about herd immunity. In a much-derided February 2021 *Wall Street Journal* op-ed, for example, Makary falsely promised the arrival of COVID herd immunity by April of that year. While Makary's contrarian views made him no friends in the field of public health, they did make him a favorite on the political Right. The watchdog group Media Matters included him on its list of "The dishonest doctors who were Fox News' most frequent medical guests in 2021" alongside Bhattacharya.

Makary will be joined on the panel by Stanford Professor of Health Policy Dr. Eran Bendavid, who co-authored an influential, but flawed seroprevalence study early on in the pandemic with Bhattacharya. The study, which significantly overstated the prevalence and downplayed the seriousness of COVID, was partly funded by the founder of JetBlue airlines who had been vocally critical of lockdowns.

A third member of the panel will be UCSF Professor of Medicine Dr. Monica Gandhi, who also earned a reputation for making overly optimistic predictions about the pandemic.

For example, Gandhi—like Bhattacharya—famously suggested that India had achieved herd immunity in early 2021 ahead of its deadly Delta surge. Unlike Bhattacharya, she acknowledged the mistake as her "biggest regret" after three of her family members died.

In February 2021, Gandhi downplayed the danger of new variants, declaring during an interview, "I need to say variants shmariants. Okay, I'm sorry. I don't know what kind of trouble that's gonna get me in." A few months later, she dismissed the need for COVID boosters. In a February 2022 interview on MSNBC, at the height of the Omicron BA.1 surge, then-host Mehdi Hasan confronted her on a litany of errors, prompting her to apologize and say, "I will try not to make any more predictions."

Lastly, there is Anders Tegnell, formerly Sweden's top epidemiologist, who put the mass infection herd immunity strategy advocated in the Great Barrington Declaration to the test, resulting in more deaths per capita than its immediate neighbors during the early waves of the pandemic—something Tegnell admitted in June 2020. Bhattacharya and his Great Barrington Declaration co-authors have long touted Sweden's response as a model for the world.

The second panel of the day is titled "Pandemic Policy from a Global Perspective" and lists Great Barrington Declaration co-author and Oxford University epidemiologist Dr. Sunetra Gupta as a speaker. Gupta is the founder of the UK-based anti-lockdown group Collateral Global, which lists Bhattacharya as a member of their scientific advisory and editorial boards. Another panelist, Kevin Bardosh, is an applied medical anthropologist and Collateral Global's director and head of research. Bardosh, a vocal critic of vaccine mandates, has appeared on Bhattacharya's podcast "Illusion of Consensus," which promotes his contrarian public health perspectives.

Joining Gupta and Bardosh is UCSF oncologist and professor Dr. Vinay Prasad, a longtime ideological ally of Bhattacharya's, who was part of the group of medical professionals behind the so-called Urgency of Normal toolkit, which was criticized for containing serious inaccuracies including the assertion that COVID is "flu-like" for unvaccinated children.

Prasad built a large social media audience identifying as a liberal while cozying up to

conspiratorial elements of the far-Right, peddling misleading claims related to COVID, and has cross-published with the Brownstone. Like Bhattacharya, Prasad has vastly overstated the risk of vaccines to young people and understated the risks of the virus. He has suggested that more research is needed to show COVID booster shots actually lower the risk of hospitalization and death, and called medical professionals who want masking to continue "irrational."

Prasad has also come under fire for making extreme statements in opposition to public health efforts. In an October 2021 blog post, he invoked Nazi Germany, suggesting that controlling the virus could lead to fascism.

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The third panel, "Misinformation, Censorship, and Academic Freedom," will feature more Bhattacharya allies. One of the speakers, attorney Jenin Younes of the New Civil Liberties Alliance, a right-wing litigation outfit that has received funding from billionaire industrialist Charles Koch. Younes represented the professor in a failed lawsuit against the Biden administration for allegedly coercing social media companies into "censoring" dissenting voices like his at the height of the pandemic. Despite its conservative majority, the Supreme Court swatted down the suit in March in a 6-3 ruling, holding that the plaintiffs lacked standing and failed to prove the harm they alleged. The panel discussion appears to be aimed at rehashing this litigation.

Joining Younes will be Dr. Scott Atlas, a neuroradiologist and Bhattacharya ally from the Hoover Institution, where he is also a senior fellow. Atlas famously helped organize the Great Barrington Declaration and is mentioned prominently in a 2022 report from the Democratic House Select Subcommittee on the Coronavirus Crisis for his role in selling the Trump administration on a laissez-faire pandemic response. Stanford formally and publicly distanced itself from Atlas in 2020.

The final panel will focus on the origins of COVID, which has been a focus of the HSSCP as well as a recent report from the right-wing Heritage Foundation. The only panelist slated to speak is One Health News co-founder Laura Kahn, who is a proponent of the lab leak idea and opponent of so-called "gain of function" research. Unlike Bhattacharya, Kahn has offered full-throated support of mask and vaccine mandates, posts on her X

account reveal. She also backed lockdowns in 2020.

Closing remarks will be given by Stanford's Dr. John Ioannidis, a respected and highly published physician-scientist prior to the pandemic who drew heavy criticism for his COVID commentary. Ioannidis was a co-author of the flawed seroprevalence study with Bhattacharya and Bendavid. In March 2020, Ioannidis published an influential opinion piece for *STAT News* arguing against lockdowns and floated the idea that COVID could kill as few as 10,000 Americans. Today, the official death toll of the pandemic stands at 1.2 million in the U.S. alone.

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Public health experts and scientists expressed alarm at the prospect of the Stanford conference. Dr. Peter Hotez, chair of the Center for Vaccine Development at Texas Children's Hospital, took to X (formerly Twitter) to criticize the school for platforming "a full on anti-science agenda (and revisionist history)." Hotez called the event "tone deaf to how this kind of rhetoric contributed to the deaths of thousands of Americans during the pandemic by convincing them to shun vaccines or minimize Covid."

Molecular biologist and science communicator Philipp Markolin had a similar take, calling the panelists "a who-is-who of rightwing-propped up contrarians" and telling *Important Context* that the summit represents a victory for conservative ideologues who operate through networks of dark money groups.

"To maintain their value to these networks, academic contrarians rely on the imprimatur and reputation of the academic institutions that house them, often using the veneer of academic freedom for spreading harmful scientific disinformation for naked political advocacy or profiteering," he said. "This is antithetical to the scientific method, and corrosive to public trust in science and scientific institutions. However, academic institutions are often ill-equipped or unwilling to speak up against their own politically-entwined contrarians (especially ones with a large platform) for fear of political repercussions and perception of anti-conservative bias."

Mallory Harris, who graduated in May from Stanford with a Ph.D. in biology, told *Important Context* that "It's been embarrassing and disappointing to see Stanford

University as an institution conflated with the fringe opinions of a few contrarians.”

Harris, who did her dissertation on infectious diseases and human behavior, including the spread of anti-vaccine misinformation, and led a student group called Scientists Speak Up focused on countering scientific misinformation, argued that the real issue the summit raises is not academic freedom, but academic rigor.

”Based on the panelists and framing, I expect this summit will repeat the same grievances and misrepresentations without any substantive academic contribution—which is the prerogative of the organizers,” she said. “However, it's alarming to me that the Stanford president is choosing to speak and give the university's tacit endorsement to these speakers and their positions.”

“Their definition of academic freedom is entitlement to the largest platforms at the university, regardless of the validity or rigor of your work, without any criticism,” she added. “This is, of course, nonsense. They can pursue whatever line of *research* they want. They can host whatever conference they want. But the rest of us aren't required to pretend it's worth attending.”

In response to our inquiry, the Stanford Department of Health Policy provided *Important Context* with a statement defending the event and panelist choices.

“The conference was organized to highlight some of the many important topics that public health officials and policymakers will need to address in preparing for future pandemics,” it read. “The speakers, including those already listed and others who will be added over the next several weeks, represent a wide range of views on this issue. We look forward to a civil, informed, and robust debate.”

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